

*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

# ***MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES***

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## **THE NAVAL ASSUALT ON GALLIPOLI GOING FOR BROKE OR JUST BROKEN**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

**Major STEVE L. WILSON, USMC**

**AY 01-02**

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**Mentor: Dr. John P. Cann, Ph.D.**

**Approved: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Date: 15 April 2002**

**Mentor: LTC Steinar Amundsen**

**Approved: \_\_\_\_\_**

**Date: 15 April 2002**

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 15-04-2002		2. REPORT TYPE Student research paper		3. DATES COVERED (FROM - TO) xx-xx-2001 to xx-xx-2002	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Naval Assault on Gallipoli Going for Broke or Just Broken Unclassified				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Wilson, Steve L. ;				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College 2076 South Street MCCDC Quantico, VA22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College 2076 South Street MCCDC Quantico, VA22134-5068				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT A PUBLIC RELEASE					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See report.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	
		Public Release	57	EM114, (blank) lfenster@dtic.mil	
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified		19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER International Area Code Area Code Telephone Number 703767-9007 DSN 427-9007	
				Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98) Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39.18	

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188

public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters services, directorate for information operations and reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis highway, suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the office of management and budget, paperwork reduction project (0704-0188), Washington, dc 20503

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (LEAVE BLANK)		2. REPORT DATE <b>15 APR 2002</b>	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED <b>STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER</b>
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE  <b>THE NAVAL ASSAULT ON GALLIPOLI; GOING FOR BROKE OR JUST BROKEN</b>		5. FUNDING NUMBERS  <b>N/A</b>	
6. AUTHOR(S)  <b>MAJOR STEVE WILSON, U.S. MARINE CORPS</b>			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  <b>USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER  <b>NONE</b>	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)  <b>SAME AS #7.</b>		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER:  <b>NONE</b>	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES  <b>NONE</b>			
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT  <b>NO RESTRICTIONS</b>		12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE  <b>N/A</b>	
13. ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS)  <b>IN 1914, THE ALLIES EMBARKED UPON AN OPERATION TO FORCE THEIR WAY THROUGH THE DARDANELLES WITH A PURLEY NAVAL FORCE. IN THE END, THIS OPERATION FAILED TO MEET ITS OBJECTIVES. HISTORIANS AND MILITARY STRATEGISTS HAVE CONTINUED TO DEBATE THE SOUNDNESS OF THIS STRATEGY AND WHY IT ULTIMATELY FAILED. THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS REPORT IS TO PROVIDE A CLEARER UNDERSTANDING OF WHY THE ALLIES UNDERTOOK THE NAVAL ASSAULT AGAINST THE GALLIPOLI PENINSULA, AND WHETHER OR NOT ITS FAILURE WAS DUE TO POOR MILITARY STRATEGY, POOR EXECUTION, OR BOTH.</b>			
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH)  <b>GALLIPOLI DARDANELLES NAVAL ASSUALT</b>		15. NUMBER OF PAGES:  	
		16. PRICE CODE: <b>N/A</b>	

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE:	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
<b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>	<b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>	<b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>	<b>NONE</b>

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Title:** The Naval Assault on Gallipoli; Going for Broke or Just Broken

**Author:** Major Steven L. Wilson, USMC

**Thesis:**

Was the failure of the naval assault on Gallipoli the product of poor military strategy, poor execution, or both?

**Discussion:**

When analyzing the 1914 Allied naval assault on Gallipoli, it becomes clear that there are two predominant arguments in support of the conclusion that the assault was the product of faulty military strategy and was thus doomed to failure from the start.

The first argument asserts that even if the ships would have been able to make it through the straits, they did not possess the power to force the capitulation of Turkey. While there is much speculation in support of this assertion, there is equally as much speculation leading to the conclusion that if the fleet had made it through the Dardanelles, Constantinople would have fallen to the Allies. The fall of Constantinople would subsequently have led to the collapse of the Turkish alliance with Germany. While this question can never be positively resolved, the preponderance of evidence does seem to suggest that it was reasonable to believe that a purely naval strategy could have been successful in bringing about the defeat of Turkey.

The second predominate argument asserts that it was unreasonable to believe that a purely naval force could have forced the straits given the Turkish defenses in that area. While exploring this assertion, it becomes clear that forcing the straits would not have been easy. However, it was a calculated risk that had every chance of succeeding. Given the Allied advantage in firepower, the limitations of the Turkish batteries, and the capabilities of determined minesweepers, it is certainly reasonable to believe that it could have been accomplished.

Given the reasonable assumption that a purely naval operation was not the product of poor military strategy doomed to failure from the start, it would then seem that poor execution had caused the plan to fail.

Arguably, many things could have altered the outcome of this operation. Despite this, the evidence clearly shows that after the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, the Allies had a clear and strong advantage. Further, there is much evidence to support the conclusion that with one more push, the fleet could have gotten through the straits.

In the end, the overall failure of the operation to meet its objectives can only be attributed to the fact that the plan was changed and the potentially successful purely naval operation was abandoned.

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Constantinople or Istanbul, as it is known today, has played a key role in history as the gateway between Europe and Asia. In 1807, as Napoleon advanced eastward against the Russians, he recognized its importance when he stated, "Essentially the great question remains: Who will control Constantinople?" In 1915, control of this important area was yet again in dispute. As Turkey entered WWI on the side of Germany, plans were made by the Allies to send a force to the Dardanelles. The subsequent 1915 Allied campaign against Gallipoli is marked by history as one of the most controversial campaigns of all time.

Conceived by Winston Churchill, the Gallipoli campaign was intended to link Russia with its western allies and eventually lead to the defeat of Germany. However, history reveals that Gallipoli was ultimately an epic story of confused planning, lost opportunities, and military incompetence. Historically, this campaign has been separated into four areas; the naval assault, the amphibious operation, the land operations, and the withdrawal. While each phase of the campaign holds valuable lessons; the naval assault, which directly and indirectly had a profound effect on the rest of the campaign, has been one of the most controversial.

The question of whether or not the naval assault should have been undertaken has been hotly debated. The idea of using the naval forces of one country to defeat the land force of another does seem to grossly overestimate the effectiveness of sea power. The Allied strategy of using only naval vessels and Marine raiding parties to force the Narrows and



subsequently shell Constantinople into submission appears simplistic at best. On many occasions, history has demonstrated the limitations of sea power when it comes to defeating land defenses. The failure of the British naval attack upon Sebastopol during the Crimean war and the damage sustained by the Italians at Lissa in 1866 both serve as classic examples of warships being repelled by land defenses. On the other hand, history also provides examples of how a naval force can effectively use fire to defeat land forces. A British squadron overcame the French defenses at Alexandria in 1798, a handful of American vessels disposed of the Spanish fortifications that protected the harbor of Manila in 1898, and Italian battleships and cruisers destroyed shore batteries at Tripoli during the Italian-Turkish war. In fact, forcing the Dardanelles with a purely naval force had been previously accomplished by the British. In 1807, Admiral Sir John Duckworth of the Royal Navy, took a squadron of two-decker and three-decker ships down the straits bombarding the Turkish defenses along the way in an attempt to threaten Constantinople. While he was successful at forcing the straits, the wind did not hold in the sea of Marmora, and he was unable to attack the city.<sup>1</sup>

Why did the Allies undertake this operation? Was the naval assault in 1915 the product of a faulty military strategy that was doomed to failure before it began? Or, was this assault part of a reasonable military strategy that was poorly executed? It has been argued that when Churchill witnessed the destruction of Antwerp's forts by the Germans on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, he thought that the naval guns of the fleet would simply smash the old forts located on the Dardanelles in a similar fashion.<sup>2</sup> However, this view assumes that Churchill did not understand the distinction between a naval gun and a howitzer and disregarded the

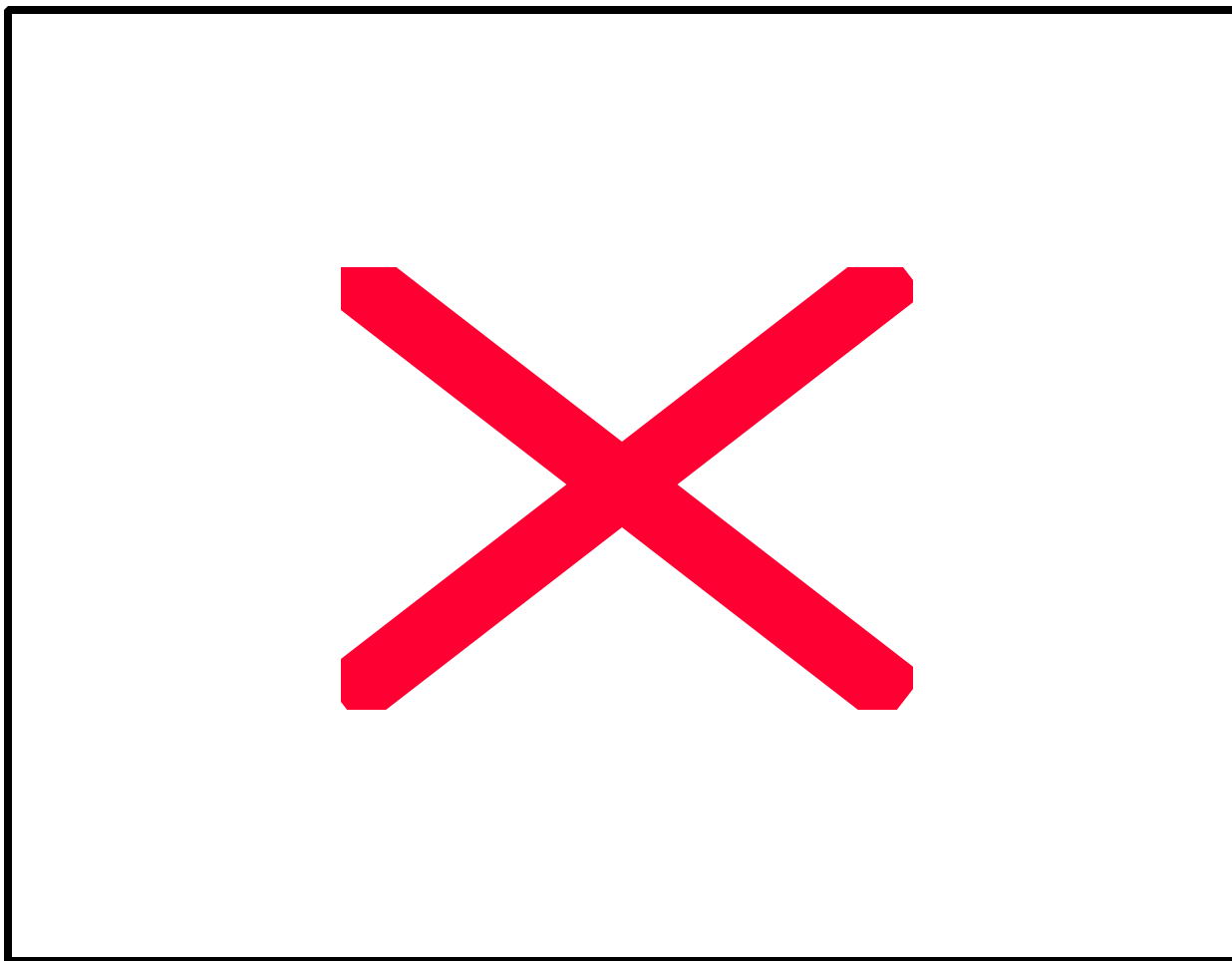
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<sup>1</sup> Sir C. E. Callwell, Major General, (*Campaigns and Their Lessons*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1924), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Alan, Moorehead, *Gallipoli*. (Annapolis, MD: Nautical & Aviation Publishing Co. 1985), 46.

difference between firing afloat and firing ashore. Ultimately, the political, strategic, and operational circumstances that existed in 1914 must be analyzed in order to provide a clearer understanding of this assault, why it was undertaken, and why it failed. The objective of this report is to provide a clearer understanding of why the Allies undertook the naval assault against the Gallipoli Peninsula, and whether or not its failure was due to poor military strategy, poor execution, or both.

## Geopolitical Considerations



The political situation that existed at the end of September in 1914 on the eve of the naval assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula was complex. The Triple Entente of France, Britain, and Russia were locked in a struggle for survival against Germany. While the British still maintained the strongest navy, German submarines posed a threat to their dominance. Furthermore, the land battlefields of Europe were at a stalemate. After the battle of the Marne, which began on the 5<sup>th</sup> September and lasted five days, the Western Front was now well established and was consuming men at a staggering rate. The killing fields in France had created over a million Allied casualties in the first three months of the war. By November of

1914, on the Eastern Front, the Russian army was beginning to falter everywhere. It had suffered over a million casualties and its ammunition and supplies were running low.

Germany was beginning to realize that victory would not be swift. Germany and the Allies were now interested in gaining allies in the Balkans and or Baltics. At a minimum, the Allies wanted these areas to remain neutral.

Turkey had political ties with both Germany and Britain. Until the end of September 1914, it was still unknown whether Turkey would ally itself with the Allies or the Germans. The Turkish government of 1914 was run by a group of young revolutionaries known as the Young Turks. The key personalities were Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, Talaat Bey, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and Djemal Pasha, the Minister of the Navy. The Young Turks had risen to power in 1908 during a revolutionary movement originating in the northern regions of the empire. In that same year, the Young Turks had forced Sultan Abdul Hamid to accept a constitution. The following year, after an Islamite contra-revolution had been smothered, it became apparent that the Sultan was slowing the ascent of the Young Turks to power. However, the Young Turks were aware of the necessity of maintaining a Sultan and Kalief to act as a worldly and religious leader for the people. Thus, the Young Turks deposed Abdul Hamid, who was exiled to Salonika. He was replaced by his brother Mehmed V. Mehmed V possessed a weak personality and would not interfere with the political plans of the Young Turks.<sup>3</sup>

After the Sultan was deposed, Enver Pasha fired 1,200 officers because of incompetence. Among those fired were 150 generals and colonels. The rapidly changing political and military situation brought about by the Balkan Wars and opposition to the Young

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<sup>3</sup> Robert R. James, *Gallipoli*, (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd. 1965), 6.

Turks led to a totalitarian regime. However, the Young Turks' hold on power was very unstable. The British believed that the Young Turks, who had strong ties with Germany, might be deposed at any moment. Turkey's government was bankrupt, and Constantinople had only the frailest hold on its outlying centers, such as, Baghdad and Damascus. It was highly likely that these areas might at any time break off into an independent state. The Turkish population was becoming more and more discontent with the Young Turks. One reason for this discontent was the fact that the government run by the Young Turks was requisitioning private property at an alarming rate in order to finance their military forces. To further exacerbate this situation, Turkey was war-weary after five years of fighting in the Balkans. They had suffered many defeats resulting in the loss of all possessions in Europe west of a line from Enos on the Aegean Sea to Midia on the Black Sea, with the exception of Albania. Turkish sovereignty over Crete was also withdrawn, and it was united with Greece. Its army was depleted and did not possess the effective weaponry to continue a prolonged war.

After the losses sustained by the Turks in the Balkans Wars, the Young Turks wanted to modernize the Turkish Army and Navy. In the summer of 1913, the Young Turks had requested that a German Military Mission be sent to Turkey. The German response was overwhelming. Hundreds of German officers, instructors and technicians began to arrive. The Germans took control of all munitions factories, they manned the guns along the Bosphorus and the Dardenelles, and they reorganized the tactics and training of the Turkish infantry.<sup>4</sup> The commander of the German Military Mission was General Liman Von Sanders, a competent officer who had spent his life in the German Army.

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<sup>4</sup> Moorehead, 22.

The Young Turks had also contracted to buy two battleships from Britain and requested a British Naval Mission be sent to Turkey. Realizing the importance of maintaining a passageway from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea and the critical nature of maintaining a secure passage through the Suez, the British agreed to sell the two battleships and sent a British Naval Mission to help train the Turkish Navy. Given these circumstances, the British hoped that the Turks would, at a minimum, maintain neutrality.

The decision made on August 3<sup>rd</sup> by the British government to keep the two warships that had been promised to Turkey created a chain reaction that the British had not anticipated. The Germans turned this misstep to their advantage when they delivered the warships Goeben and Breslau to make good on the defaulted promise. Understandably, these circumstances had a profound effect on Turkey's ultimate decision to enter the war on the side of the Germans. The British Naval Mission was withdrawn from Turkey on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, a Turkish torpedo boat was stopped at the mouth of the Dardanelles by a British squadron and sent back to Turkey. Upon hearing this, Weber Pasha, the German soldier commanding the Turkish fortification at the mouth of the Dardanelles, closed the passage.<sup>5</sup> This was a surprise move by the Germans to coerce the Turks into the war on the side of the Germans. The move proved successful, as the Young Turks did not force the Germans to reopen the passage.

The blockage of the Dardanelles created a tremendous problem for the Triple Entente. Ninety percent of Russia's grain and 50 percent of all other exports from Russia passed through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The northern port of Archangelsk was frozen over during the long winter. Vladivostok, the primary Pacific port, was separated from

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<sup>5</sup> Moorehead, 29.

Moscow by 5,000 miles of tenuous railway. It was also feared that the German fleet would completely blockade the Baltic. After Turkey allied itself with Germany, Russia was cut off from its Allies. The Grand Duke Nicholas, the Commander in Chief of the Russian Army, had also requested that the Allies do something to ease the pressure that the Turks had created in the Caucasus. Along with these issues, Turkey's alliance with Germany posed a threat to the British control of the Suez Canal and the oil fields of Persia. The Triple Entente was heavily reliant upon oil from this region. It was decided that the British would take action against the Turks, but the nature of this action was unclear. Winston Churchill advocated an attack against Turkish forces in the Dardanelles and subsequently Constantinople. Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, supported this operation as a diversion to assist Russia and help secure the flow of oil. However, he was unwilling to divert any troops earmarked for France or draw any troops away from the Western Front in order to support the operation. In his estimation, the Western Front was the key to the entire war.

By the end of September 1914, the Triple Entente was looking for a way to break the stalemate on the Western Front and assist Russia so that it would be able to remain in the war. At that time, the Triple Entente was exploring three options. It could make the Western Front the main effort, it could launch a campaign in the Baltics, or it could launch a campaign in the Balkans.

The senior leadership of the British Army and Lord Kitchener believed that the best option was to focus the main effort on the Western Front in an attempt to create a breach and a subsequent advance toward Berlin. Kitchener believed that the west was the main and decisive theater. If Allied forces were diverted to another area to pursue operations, then Germany might be able to break through in France and subsequently invade England. The

weakness in a plan that would throw everything at the Western Front in a war of attrition had already been established. After the first battle of the Marne, which had ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, it was clear that this strategy would result in devastating losses. The Germans had strong defenses all along the front line, and reinforcements and supplies could be shifted rapidly along internal lines of communication by rail. Also, if something were not done to assist Russia in the East, it would soon be defeated. Russia's defeat would allow Germany to focus its forces in the west, creating a greater danger for France and Britain.

This second option of launching a campaign in the Baltic provided an alternative to the high cost of an offensive on the Western Front. It was believed that success in the Baltic would bring the Baltic States into the Alliance and create new problems for the Germans. Further, it would be possible to use Russian troops for a potential landing on the German coast and an attack on Berlin, which was only 90 miles inland. An offensive in this theater would also serve to take pressure off of the Western Front by forcing Germany to move forces from the west into this theater. This might provide an opportunity for breakouts in the west or at a minimum prevention of future German advances toward Paris and London. An operation in the Baltic would also provide the most direct linkup with Russia. Gaining area and Allies in the Baltic would clearly bring much needed relief to the Russians. However, the success of this plan was centered on the defeat of the German High Seas Fleet that controlled this area. This was a formidable force that included the threat of German submarines as well as the traditional surface battle force.

The third option of a campaign in the Balkans held many of the same advantages as a campaign in the Baltics. First, it was believed that a campaign in the Balkans would help to gain Allies and take pressure off of the Western Front. Specifically, it was thought that



Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania would drop neutrality. It would also provide a connection with Russia through the Black Sea. In addition to these benefits, a campaign in the Balkans had additional advantages over the other options. The Allies had control of the Mediterranean. This enabled them to support an operation in this area without as much risk as that associated with supporting a campaign in the Baltics. They would also be fighting Turks rather than Germans. As previously mentioned, the Turkish army had suffered many defeats in the Balkans and did not possess effective weaponry. It was believed that they could be easily defeated. Germany's line of communication to the east would be severed, thus protecting Egypt and India. Finally, Persian oil would be secure from the Turkish threat. A successful campaign in this area would clearly knock Turkey out of the war. Turkey's defeat would bring more pressure on the Germans in the east, provide additional allies, and secure oil supplies for the Allied War Machine.

## A Question of Military Strategy



Once the decision was made to undertake a campaign in the Balkans, the Allies identified the main objective as gaining control of Constantinople and the Bosphorus.<sup>6</sup> Only by taking this critical terrain could the Allies ensure that Russia could export its abundant supply of wheat and continue to receive war materials from the west. It would also split the Sultan's dominions in two. It was hoped that by splitting the Sultan's dominions, the Allies would provide the spark that would inevitably lead to the fragmentation of Turkey, as other areas would break away and form independent states. It would secure the Suez and continue Persian oil flow for the Allies. The fall of Constantinople, the Turkish political and commercial capital, would have a tremendous negative effect on the morale of its population. The plan put forth by Sir John Fisher, the Royal Navy's First Sea Lord, called for Indian forces combined with the Egyptian garrison and 75,000 British troops in France to land on the

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<sup>6</sup> Callwell, 2.

Asiatic side of the Dardanelles while the Greeks attacked the peninsula and the Bulgarians marched on Constantinople. The British fleet would force the Dardanelles and support this operation.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece were firmly neutral at the time. However, it was believed that if the Dardanelles could be forced, these three countries could be coerced into joining the Allies in defeating Constantinople in an attempt to gain more territory from the Turks. Thus, since Kitchener had already stated that he would not remove forces from France, the question of whether or not the straits could be forced by ship alone became central to the campaign.

#### *Argument in Support of a Purely Naval Assault*

While it is clear that a campaign in the Balkans held great advantage for the Allies, whether or not a purely naval force could accomplish the objectives of this campaign was questionable. For many years prior to outbreak of WWI, sailors agreed that it was far too hazardous to use warships to attack coastal fortresses. More specifically, the British Admiralty and War Office had drafted a memorandum in 1906 declaring that it was too risky to attempt the forcing of the Dardanelles with a purely naval contingent.<sup>8</sup> Given this, it would not seem logical that the Allied fleet would embark upon such a course. Upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that the Allies had many compelling reasons to believe that this type of operation could be successful. Further, they believed that the risks associated with such an operation could be minimized.

For planning purposes, the operation was divided into four phases: the destruction of the defenses at the entrance of the Dardanelles, the clearing of a path through the first

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<sup>7</sup> Moorehead, 36.

minefield, the destruction of the batteries in the Narrows and clearing of the minefield there, and the naval assault on Constantinople.

As for the destruction of the Turkish batteries located at the Dardanelles, the odds appeared to be in the Allies' favor. The plan included 13 battleships, 3 cruisers, 1 flotilla leader, 16 destroyers, 6 submarines, 4 seaplanes, numerous minesweepers, and many other miscellaneous vessels. These ships were equipped with nine, ten, twelve, and fifteen-inch guns.<sup>9</sup> These assets afforded a tremendous firepower advantage over the Turkish land forces located in the Dardanelles. The Turkish defenses were not formidable. They consisted of earthen batteries and old-fashioned forts with six, nine, and ten-inch guns. If these gun positions could be destroyed, clearing the Dardanelles would be a rapid process. Germany's advance across Belgium had recently demonstrated just how effective modern guns were against old forts. The forts located at Sedd-el-Bahr and Kum Kale were low lying and offered excellent targets for the ships' guns.<sup>10</sup> The Allies not only had more guns, they had greater range and accuracy. They could also use the four seaplanes to help direct the gunfire. The Allied naval forces could engage the Turkish land forces with overwhelming firepower long before they came into range of the Turkish guns. If it proved impossible to completely destroy the positions along the Dardanelles due to the limitations of naval gunfire, the fleet could still successfully force the Dardanelles. As long as the gun positions could be disrupted or suppressed long enough to allow the minesweepers to clear a path, the fleet could break through.

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<sup>8</sup> Callwell, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Edward, Erickson, *One More Push: Forcing the Dardanelles in March 1915*, (Journal of Strategic Studies, 24:3, September 2001), 166.

<sup>10</sup> Callwell, 16.

The howitzers and small guns of the Turks did not pose a great threat to the amour of the battleships. Due to trajectory and caliber, it would be very difficult for these guns to decisively defeat a battleship. However, while fire from these guns would not be decisive against the battleships, it could do some damage to the ships and their superstructures and create casualties. Further, it could interfere with mine sweeping operations.<sup>11</sup> As an example of the limitations of the Turkish batteries on shore, on the 3rd of November a combined British and French squadron bombarded the Turkish positions at the mouth of the Dardanelles. The Turkish reply was inaccurate and brief.

To add to their firepower advantage, the British also possessed excellent intelligence about the forces located on the peninsula. The British had maintained a naval mission in Turkey for years and knew all about their defenses in the Dardanelles. They had extremely accurate information on all positions and weapons. It was also known that prior to the naval bombardment, there was only one division of Turkish troops on the entire Gallipoli Peninsula. Further, this division was widely scattered in defensive positions and very poorly equipped.<sup>12</sup> As for morale, Turkey had lost every battle in the past five years, and it was believed that it would rapidly disintegrate under the momentum of the assault due to confusion and poor leadership. Also, the allied fleet maintained control of the Mediterranean at this time. German submarines posed the only credible threat faced by the Mediterranean fleet. However, the submarines' limited range made it very difficult for them to patrol that far to the east. In the words of Major General Sir C. E. Callwell, the Director of Military Operations at the British War Office in 1914, the task of forcing the Dardanelles "represented as simple a

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<sup>11</sup> Moorehead, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Moorehead, 37.

problem as a naval armament can fairly expect to be called upon to solve when it is a case of attacking shore defenses worthy of any consideration at all.”

The clearing of the minefields also did not appear to be a formidable task. Without harassment from the shore batteries, twelve minesweepers could clear a path several miles long each night. With continued patrols and naval bombardment during the day, the Allies could prevent new mines from being laid. The Narrows, which were only about three miles in length, lay only fourteen miles from the inlet at Cape Helles. By clearing four miles a day, they could be past all of the batteries and minefields in five days. Even if the Turkish shore batteries had plenty of ammunition and were able to survive the overwhelming firepower of the Allied Navy, they would still find it difficult to stop the progress of determined minesweepers. In order to effectively disrupt Allied minesweeping with Turkish shore batteries, the Turks would have to overcome the problem of providing accurate fire on small moving targets at night while being overwhelmed by Allied naval gunfire. It was believed that the process of forcing the Narrows and clearing the minefields located within would expose the allied forces to higher risk than the first two phases of the operation. However, it was believed that the large advantage in firepower would enable them to overcome the batteries located in the Narrows. Once the ships had made it through the Dardanelles, they would face no other major threats. The Goeben, the Breslau, and the rest of the Turkish fleet were no match for the Allied fleet.

It was believed that securing the lines of communications could also be readily accomplished. Military forces were assembling in the Aegean and Egypt, which would be deployed to secure the line of communication through the straits after they had been forced. Further, it was hoped that Greece would drop neutrality and help secure the straits. There had

been encouraging signs since the beginning of the war that the Greeks wanted to join the Allies. While the political situation between Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece was complex, by joining together against Turkey, they could all gain substantially.

Once the ships had made it through the Dardanelles, they would embark upon the final phase of the operation, bombarding Constantinople into capitulation. At first glance, this portion of the operation appears to be without reason. Yet advocates of the plan had several reasons for believing that it could be accomplished. Turkey's current government was extremely weak. While the Young Turks had loose control over Turkey, anything could happen with the appearance of a fleet of enemy ships off Constantinople. In the five years prior to this operation, Constantinople had twice been thrown into revolution. It was divided between supporters of the exiled Sultan Abdul Hamid and the Young Turks and had a reputation for being a chaotic place prone to hysteria. The havoc that allied naval guns would reap upon the wooden tumbledown houses would be tremendous. Also, the only two munitions factories in Turkey were both located upon the shore of Constantinople and could be easily destroyed by naval gunfire. Other key military objectives located near shore that could be easily destroyed were the Galata Bridges and the Ministry of War.<sup>13</sup> It was thought that the shelling would destroy key objectives, wreak havoc and create fear among the inhabitants, and ultimately destabilize an already shaky government. Constantinople would fall like a house of cards from one decisive push.

It was further believed that once Constantinople had fallen, the rest of the country would follow. This was not an unreasonable assumption. Constantinople was the hub of the Turkish military, economic, political, and industrial base. Putting Constantinople in chaos

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<sup>13</sup>Moorehead, 40.

would essentially put the rest of the country in chaos as well. Once the government had been destabilized and was no longer effective, it would not have been able to easily reassemble and regroup, as there was only a primitive network of roads and railways.<sup>14</sup> Outlying states would most likely proclaim their independence. It was believed that Bulgaria and Greece could be enticed to drop their neutrality and secure the area. Russia had also talked of sending troops in support of this plan. In essence, the fall of Constantinople would mean the defeat of Turkey. As stated by Churchill, “If one battle cruiser had been enough to bring Turkey into the war then surely it was not altogether too much to hope that the arrival of half a dozen such ships would get her out of it.”

Another important question to consider when analyzing the strategy of the naval assault on Gallipoli is how much was at risk in case of failure. It might have been quite a different matter if the entire outcome of the war rested on the success or failure of this operation. However, this was not the case. The vast majority of the British fleet that was to engage the Turks was semi-obsolete, and some ships were due for the scrap yard. These types of vessels were best used as floating gun platforms rather than maneuver units to be employed against the German High Seas Fleet. If one was lost, it would not jeopardize the well-established domination of the allied navies over those of the enemy outside the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> In the Mediterranean, the allied fleet and lines of communications were almost completely unchallenged. Providing supplies and protection for the fleet would not prove too arduous a task. While the number of sailors that might be lost was large, it was nothing compared to the loss of life that would be involved in an offensive on the Western Front. Further, the benefits derived from the success of this operation would be tremendous.

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<sup>14</sup> Moorehead, 41.



It was thought by Kitchener that a victory in the Balkans could bring about an end to the war. He stated as much when he remarked, “If the fleet gets through, Constantinople will fall of itself and you will have won, not a battle, but the war.”<sup>16</sup> Churchill summed up the cost versus benefit analysis when he stated in a letter to the fleet Commander that, “Importance of results would justify severe loss.” In the end, while the outcome of the operation was by no means assured, it was certainly reasonable to believe that it had a chance for success if it were executed boldly and decisively.

#### *Argument in Opposition to a Purely Naval Assault*

Given the circumstances, there are still many reasons to believe that a strategy of using only naval assets to obtain the objective was destined to fail and expose the allied navy to great risk. Sir John Fisher, the First Sea Lord, argued that the Grand Fleet in the North Sea would be seriously weakened by the demands of the operation and might find itself exposed to attack from the German Fleet. At a minimum, the Germans would certainly be aware that the operation was stretching allied assets and supplies and might seek to exploit this opportunity in another area. If one follows Churchill’s assertion that the Grand Fleet was so strengthened at the outbreak of war that it would continue to maintain German superiority despite the operation in the Dardanelles, there are still many other issues of concern.<sup>17</sup>

Forcing the Dardanelles would not be easy despite the Allies overwhelming firepower advantage. One of the most significant problems that could not be overcome was the limitations of naval gunfire. The use of naval gunfire to destroy ground forces that are dug in

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<sup>15</sup> Callwell, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Moorehead, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World in Crisis*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1949).

or utilizing defilade is extremely difficult, if not impossible, due to the weapon's flat trajectory. Ground forces could simply move into covered positions during naval bombardments. Once there was a break in the fire they could man their guns and return fire. Also, the naval shells were armor piercing with delayed fuses intended to achieve maximum devastation inside the superstructure of enemy ships.<sup>18</sup> Against land force, this delay often meant that the shells buried themselves into the fortifications before exploding reducing its destructive force.

While it is true that the allied naval guns had a greater range than the Turkish guns, the ships would all have to eventually move within range of the Turkish guns to clear the mines and pass through the Dardanelles. There is no point along the entire forty miles of the Dardanelles that a hostile vessel cannot be reached by direct or even point-blank fire from one of the shores.<sup>19</sup> The terrain on both sides of the Dardanelles further reduced the effectiveness of the naval gunfire. This terrain clearly favored the defenders, as many of the Turkish positions were located on hills that were as high as 850 feet. These hills were ideal for the deployment of fixed and mobile gun batteries, torpedoes, and mines in a system of integrated defense where each element prevents the destruction of the others without unacceptable casualties. Many of these hills dropped off sharply on both sides of the Dardanelles providing good defilade positions. Firing up hill at short range would definitely limit the effectiveness of the naval gunfire.

It was assumed that the Turkish forces were disorganized, lacked strong leadership, and would not be able to put up a strong defense once the operation began. It was believed

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Hart, *Gallipoli: The War at Sea*, (London: Joint Imperial War Museum / Australian War Memorial Battlefield Study, September 2000), p 4.

<sup>19</sup> Moorehead, 52.

that when the Turks fell under the overwhelming fire from the fleet, they would fold. This assumption, however, did not take into account the fact that Liman Von Sanders had been put in charge of the Turkish army. He had the ability to reorganize the Turkish forces into formations capable of sustained operations.<sup>20</sup> The ability of the Turkish forces had also been greatly increased by German training.

Weather and daylight were also factors contributing to the difficulty of the operation. Gales were frequent during this time of year, and days were short. Short days would limit the duration of naval attacks and allow the Turks more time to recover from bombardments. Bad weather would break the tempo and stop the momentum of the attack. Delays would work to the advantage of the Turks as time was clearly not on the side of the Allies. Breaks in tempo would allow the Turks to reorganize and repair defenses. The Turks had portions of the First Army near Constantinople and the Second Army in the Middle East. With sufficient time, additional troops from these units could be moved to help support the Dardanelles. If the Allies were not able to break through the Narrows and secure their lines of communication rapidly, Turkish troops would be able to reinforce positions along the peninsula and the Asiatic coast, making the task much more difficult. Further, the allied air assets would not be able to assist in spotting and intelligence gathering during bad weather.

The plan for sweeping the mines was also problematic. The plan assumed that the minesweepers would be able to clear mines without being harassed by enemy fire. However, if the Turkish guns were not destroyed or suppressed, the minesweepers would be vulnerable to their fire. Also, as the minesweepers moved further up into the Narrows, they would encounter a greater volume of fire due to decreasing range and a greater number of guns. The

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<sup>20</sup> Liman Von Sanders, *Five Years in Turkey*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1927), 5-9.

minesweepers were North Sea trawlers which were limited to 5 knots. This would definitely lead to slow progress, given the fact that the current in the Narrows ran from 2 to 4 knots. Further, they were manned by fishermen and commanded by retired officers with no previous experience in minesweeping.<sup>21</sup> If they came under fire, it would slow down their progress greatly and might even make it impossible to clear the sea-lanes. In essence, success of the plan rested on whether or not the Turkish guns could be suppressed or disrupted to the point of ineffectiveness. This was clearly an uncertainty, given the limitations of allied naval gunfire.

If the fleet were able to force the Dardanelles, securing lines of communication would be extremely difficult, particularly if the Turks persisted in their defense. Considerable effort would have to be expended to maintain patrols in the Dardanelles to ensure that new mines were not laid. This would weaken the forces that were to attack Constantinople. While the Goeben and the Bresau did not pose much of a threat for the fleet, it could create problems for the security of the lines of communication while the fleet was off Constantinople. Also, the plan to maintain the lines of communication was partially contingent on support from neutral countries. Support from these countries was by no means certain. Greece was not on good terms with Russia, and the King, Constantine I, was married to the sister of the German emperor. While Greece's Prime Minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, was pro-Alley, he faced opposition from a pro-German ministry.<sup>22</sup> Also, Greece would not want to make itself vulnerable to attack from Bulgaria by attacking Turkey. Bulgaria was a German-speaking nation and had recently lost territory in the Second Balkan War to Serbia. England, France,

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<sup>21</sup> L. A. K. Boswell, Captain, Royal Navy. *The Naval Attack on the Dardanelles, 1915*, (London: Royal United Service Institute for Defence Studies. 1965), 145.

and Russia were allied to Serbia and could not promise any redress to Bulgarian losses in the Second Balkan War. Given these circumstances, it was difficult to say with whom these countries would ally themselves. However, it was clear that if Greece and Bulgaria did not enter the war rapidly on the side of the Allies, it would be difficult for the limited forces that were being assembled in Egypt to secure the lines of communication, given an organized Turkish counter offensive.

Once the fleet reached Constantinople, the question of whether or not they would be able to force Turkey to surrender was uncertain. The plan assumed that the political environment was so unstable that the Turkish people would overthrow the current government and side with the Allies. If the people were not willing or able to accomplish this, naval bombardments alone would not be able to bring about the end of the pro-German government. While the naval bombardment would certainly do tremendous damage to the area, it would not be able to destroy Turkish forces. Further, the destruction and casualties created by the naval bombardment could act as a catalyst to strengthen Turkish resolve and put them more strongly behind the government of the Young Turks.

In the final analysis, it is clear that the entire operation was reliant upon the success of each and every phase. At the same time, many of the assumptions made by the Allies relied upon many unknown and unpredictable events. If any one of these assumptions failed to take shape, the entire operation would be put in jeopardy and could ultimately result in large losses.

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<sup>22</sup> Moorehead, 79.

## **A Question of Operational Execution**

Analyzing the strategy behind the naval assault on Gallipoli has revealed that while there were reasons to believe that the strategy could have been successful, there were also many risky assumptions made. With that in mind, could the naval operation have been successful, if it had been properly executed or was it doomed to failure because of faulty assumptions about the operation? This section will examine these questions by reviewing the events that transpired and providing an analysis of the operation.

### **Phase 1: Destruction of the Turkish defenses at the mouth of the Dardanelles**

Whether by coincidence or design, the first phase of the operation began on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, 1915, which was the 108<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sir John Duckworth's exploits. At 0951 five British and three French battleships began an assault on the defenses guarding the entrance to the Dardanelles. After several hours of bombardment, it appeared that these defenses had been destroyed. However, in the afternoon when the ships moved within range of the shore batteries, the Allies received the first lesson in the limitations of naval gunfire. The Turks opened fire from multiple batteries that had been thought destroyed. The shorter range for the ships however, enabled them to bring more accurate fire to bear on the shore batteries. By the time darkness fell, all of the Turkish guns were silent yet again. At the completion of the first day, the weather turned bad and operations were temporally suspended.

When the assault resumed on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Turkish defensive positions along the southern tip of the peninsula and in the area of Troy on the Asiatic side were unable to continue and withdrew to the north. Over the next few days, through periods of bad weather, small landing parties of marines and bluejackets were put ashore to help in the destruction of

the shore defenses. The landing parties found the defenses around Cape Helles and Kum Kale almost completely deserted. They moved around these areas blowing up guns, destroying enemy positions, and smashing enemy searchlights.<sup>23</sup> As the bad weather continued and the Allied fleet was unable to sustain its attack, the Turks began to recover. Turkish soldiers returned to the southern part of the peninsula and Troy and drove off the British landing parties. Additionally, the Turkish gunners had adapted from the previous assault and had become more effective.<sup>24</sup> Despite these facts, the overmatch in firepower proved decisive again, and the Turkish batteries were easily overwhelmed and silenced.

Prior to the commencement of this operation, mistakes had been made that jeopardized its success. The naval bombardment by British and French squadrons on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November had drawn attention to the area. Prior to this, the Turkish defense along the Dardanelles consisted of only one Turkish infantry division, three artillery regiments, and a limited number of mines. In response to the bombardment, the Turks laid many lines of mines across the Narrows. The Ottoman General Staff ordered more artillery reinforcements from the Bosphorus to the peninsula. Over the course of the next few months, the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment continued to bring 150mm and 120mm howitzers and ammunition to the peninsula. Additionally, the Germans continued to send specialists to help the Turks build their defenses. By the time the naval assault commenced on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, the defenses along the entire length of the Dardanelles had been considerably improved and developed with German assistance.<sup>25</sup> The bombardment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November had also exposed the weakness of a defense focused primarily on the guns at the entrance to and along the length of the straits.

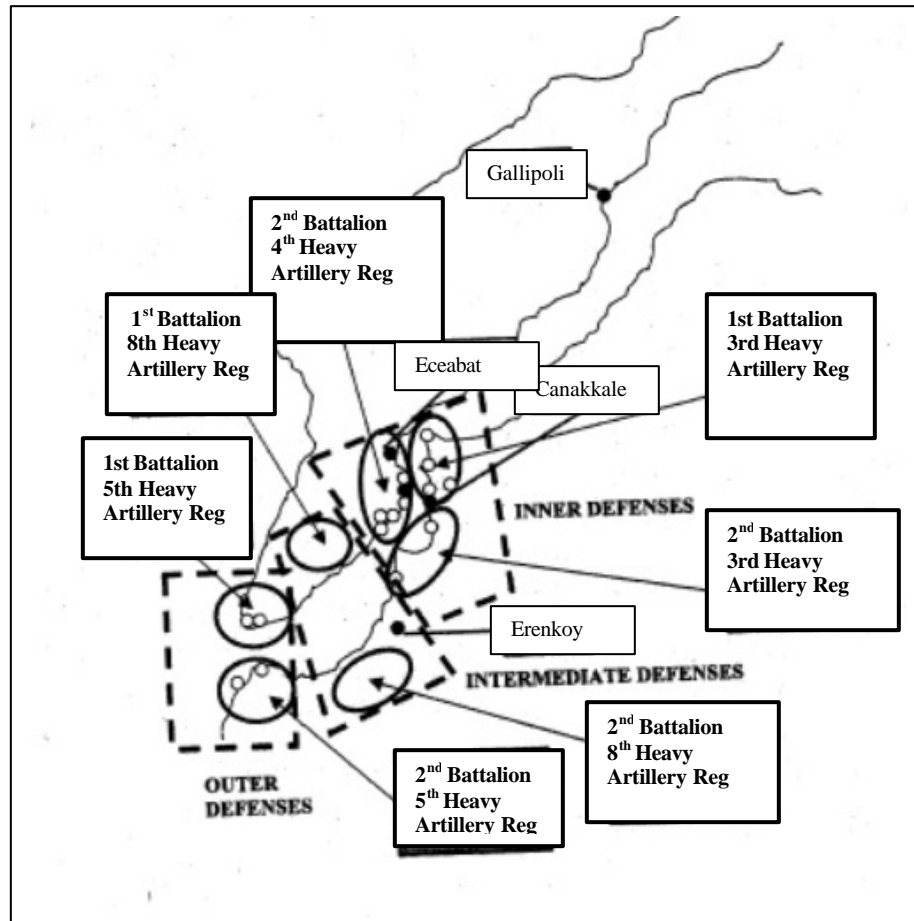
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<sup>23</sup> Moorehead, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Callwell, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Erickson, 164-166.

Severe damage inflicted on the Turkish batteries protecting the entrance to the straits had altered the nature of their defenses. The Turks shifted the focus of their defense to the minefields. By the end of November, five lines of mines had been laid, with a total of 191 contact mines. By the time the naval bombardment had commenced on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, approximately 11 lines of mines had been placed, with a total of almost 350 contact mines.<sup>26</sup> The Allies had completely sacrificed the element of surprise, and the Turks had significantly improved their situation. In light of how much of an effect this had on the execution of the operation, the uncoordinated bombardment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> must be considered a huge mistake.



<sup>26</sup> James, 15.



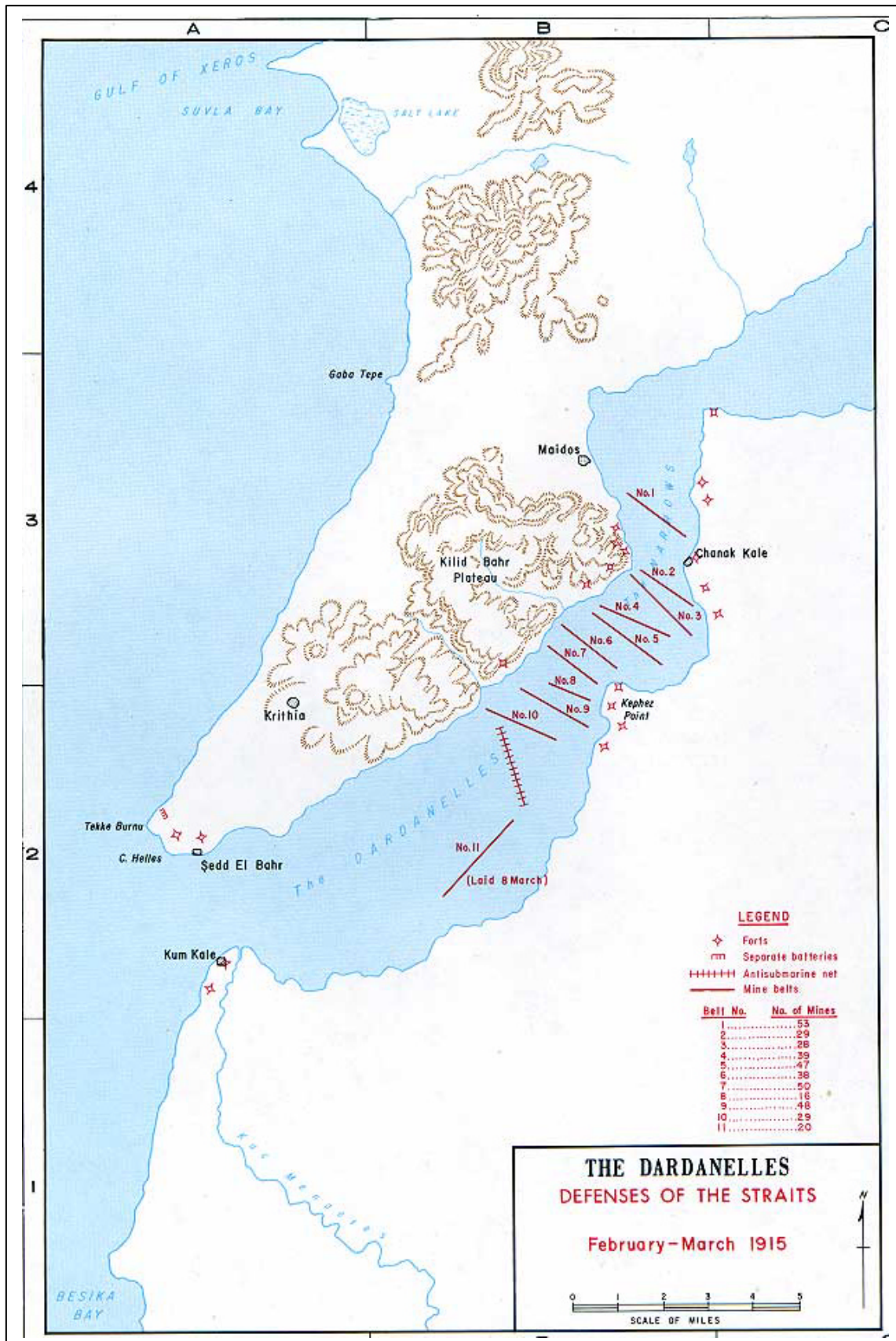
Despite the fact that the Turks had been alerted to the attack on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February and had greatly reinforced their defenses, the Allies were still able to completely overwhelm them with firepower. The success of the Allied naval bombardments and the British landing parties eliminated the Turkish 5<sup>th</sup> Heavy Artillery Regiment from the Turkish order of battle.<sup>27</sup> The Allies did, however, enjoy several advantages in this first phase of the operation that they would not have in subsequent phases. The defenses along the entrance of the straits were low lying providing excellent targets for the fleet. The fleet had ample maneuvering room and they did not have to worry about mines. It further was able to engage the shore defenses without moving into enemy range.

In the end, this first phase of the operation had shown that while it was possible to suppress the enemy batteries, destroying them would be much more difficult. It had demonstrated that the allied vessels would have to move in close and attack each individual Turkish gun to be effective. The Allies had been given a preliminary glimpse of the Turkish tactics of remaining under cover until allied fire had slowed or ceased, and the ships were in range. The first phase had demonstrated the impact that weather could have on the tempo and momentum of the operation. The five days between the two bombardments had broken the momentum of the attack and allowed the Turks time to regroup. On the positive side, the first phase had also demonstrated the limitations of the shore defenses and confirmed that the Allies possessed an overmatch in firepower. Turkish fire was easily overwhelmed, notoriously inaccurate, and posed very little threat to the battleships.

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<sup>27</sup> Erickson, 169.

*Phase 2: Clearing of the mines up to the Narrows*



The next phase of the operation, which included clearing the mines located at the mouth of the Dardanelles and up to the Narrows, began on the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> of February. The minesweeping went quite well on the first night as four miles were cleared before daylight of the 26<sup>th</sup>. On the 27<sup>th</sup> came a break in the favorable weather. This created another unplanned pause in the operation. Due to the slow progress of the operation and the continuing bad weather, the Turks were becoming more confident. They continued to move their emplacements, lay low during the bombardment, and reemerge during breaks in the shelling. While this had little effect on the battleships, the sweepers were experiencing a good deal of fire from concealed field guns and howitzers. Enemy searchlights were also proving effective at spotting sweepers and increasing fire accuracy for the Turks. Despite these problems, during the periods of good weather the sweepers were able to clear a wide sea lane almost up to Kephea Point about eight miles from the entrance of the Dardanelles by the 4<sup>th</sup> of March without appreciable damage to any vessels. At this point, however, the minesweepers were slowing significantly. The crews of the minesweepers were civilians who were unwilling to expose themselves to such dangers. To add to this, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March the weather once again began to turn bad. However, it was not so bad as to preclude further naval bombardments.<sup>28</sup> Admiral Carden, the officer in charge of the operation, was becoming apprehensive. No further bombardments were taken for two days, enabling the Turks time to redistribute ammunition and recover from previous attacks. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, the mine clearing continued. For the next two nights, the mine sweeping operation went poorly. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, one of the minesweepers hit a mine and exploded while the others made very little progress due to the Turkish guns. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, the minesweepers simply turned and ran when

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<sup>28</sup> Callwell, 21.

the Turks opened fire. Despite the fact that they had only sustained two casualties and one lost minesweeper, the Turkish guns had effectively stopped the allied fleet. At this point, Commodore Keyes, Admiral Carden's Chief of Staff, collected volunteers from the navy, offered civilian crews a bonus, and assembled new crews for the minesweepers. On the 13<sup>th</sup>, Keyes himself led the minesweepers back into the Dardanelles and despite the loss of several minesweepers and a few casualties, much progress was made. The fleet was now ready to begin the next phase of the operation, the forcing of the Narrows.

In analyzing this phase, it is apparent that the minesweepers had done a good job clearing the mines until they drew close to Kephez Point. Just beyond Kephez Point the width of the Dardanelles closes to about two miles and marks the beginning of the Narrows. The Narrows extend about three miles up the Dardanelles. As the allied minesweepers drew close to this area, they ran into new problems. There were more mines that had to be swept in this area than previous areas. Turkish gunfire was increasing and growing more accurate and resolved. The Turks had stronger defenses and it was much more difficult to destroy the Turkish guns. The Turks were utilizing searchlights more effectively in spotting sweepers and targeting them. The battleships could not close to an effective range because of the mines and they were unable to effectively suppress Turkish guns at long range. Seaplanes were unable to get airborne to help spot because of the sea and weather conditions. The current in this area was also swifter due to the narrowness of the Dardanelles. Despite these facts, not one minesweeper had been appreciably damaged until the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, and this was due to a mine not a gun. There were a total of 36 minesweepers that could be utilized.<sup>29</sup> The loss of one, or for that matter the loss of ten, would not be a significant setback for the operation.

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<sup>29</sup> Moorehead, 58.

Commodore Keyes was convinced that the delays were the fault of the civilian crews and their leaders on the minesweepers. The civilian officer of the minesweepers had stated to him that they were not supposed to sweep under fire. Keyes had been constantly at the front during the attacks on the shore batteries and minesweeping operations observing the action, and he believed that there was a problem with the leadership and crews of these minesweepers. His dilemma was how to keep the minesweepers moving at a reasonable pace during periods of fair weather despite the Turkish fire. Keyes' answer to this was to assemble navy crews and take command of the sweepers. This proved to be decisive, as the force was able to clear many mines and move up into the first section of the Narrows in one night at the cost of only three minesweepers and a few casualties. This success leads one to believe that even without completely suppressing the Turkish guns, the mines could still be cleared if delays could be minimized. Unfortunately, the weather had continued to turn bad, forcing breaks in the tempo and allowing the Turks to recover from allied fire. However, it should also be mentioned that the breaks in the tempo were not exclusively the result of weather.

The trepidation of Admiral Carden had also played a role in the operations tempo. It has been suggested that because the weather was bad and some vessels were running low on ammunition, Carden ordered a pause in the naval bombardment that started on the 8<sup>th</sup> and lasted for several days.<sup>30</sup> However, others have suggested that the weather was not so bad as to preclude operations and events have shown that ammunition was not so critical as to justify a cessation of operations.<sup>31</sup> It is very likely that Carden may have decided that military assistance of some form was needed to continue. By the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, a considerable number of troops had arrived at the island of Lemnos, an island situated in the northeastern part of the

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<sup>30</sup> Moorehead, 57.

Aegean, westwards from the mouth of Dardanelles, and more were known to be available in Egypt. This fact did not go unnoticed by Admiral Carden. As stated by Major General Sir C. E. Callwell, “Military cooperation was in the air, the idea of bolstering up the original scheme for forcing the passage of the Dardanelles by adopting the device of bringing troops into play probably exercised its influence on naval counsels.” The fact that Carden allowed the minesweepers to continually delay the operation with no appreciable losses until Commodore Keyes took command of them also indicates his increasing doubts about the operation. Further, when Keyes suggested new crews on some of the sweepers, Carden only reluctantly consented.<sup>32</sup> Carden did not resolve to continue the operation in earnest until Churchill’s telegram arrived stating; “I do not understand why minesweepers should be interfered with by firing which causes no casualties. Two or three hundred casualties would be a moderate price to pay for sweeping up as far as the Narrows.”

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, Admiral Carden, on the verge of a nervous collapse, turned over command to Vice Admiral De Robeck stating that he could no longer continue. While it is clear that caution should be taken in the execution of any operation, it is arguable that Carden was over cautious and that this was detrimental to the momentum and tempo of the operation.

Despite these setbacks, there was good reason to believe that the operation could still be a success. A transmission had been received indicating that the Turks were very low on ammunition. According to the memoirs of Major Carl Muhlmann, a German officer on the staff of General Von Sanders’ Fifth Army during the Gallipoli campaign, the Turks were critically low on ammunition and had little ability to resupply.<sup>33</sup> While there is some question

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<sup>31</sup> Callwell, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Moorehead, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Muhlmann, Major, *Der Kampf um die Dardanellen 1915*, (Berlin: Gerhard Gtalling, 1927), 74.

as to exactly how much ammunition the Turks possessed. It is clear that Turkish fire had ceased on several occasions shortly after engaging the enemy despite the fact that Allied ships were well within range. Also, the distance by road from Constantinople to the peninsula was over 200 miles and these roads were extremely primitive. During periods of bad weather, which were frequent that time of year, they would have been almost impassable while carrying heavy loads of ammunition. At a minimum, bringing in ammunition from Constantinople would have been a very time consuming process. These facts lend credence to Major Muhlmann's claims. If the Turks were running low on ammunition with a limited ability to resupply, it would be logical to assume that, with persistence, the Allied ships would eventually get through. The Turkish fire would continue to diminish and their ability to effectively slow the progress of the minesweepers would cease to exist. If the statement of Major Muhlmann is completely disregarded in favor of a Turkish War Office official who stated that "modern ammunition for heavy guns was very short, but there was a plentiful supply of older ammunition", there is still the issues of accuracy and the ability to mass fires.<sup>34</sup> From the 18<sup>th</sup> February through the middle of March, the Turks had fired approximately 4,700 artillery shells with little results in terms of casualties and damage to Allied ships.<sup>35</sup> The sweepers had less than five miles to clear before the fleet could pass through the Narrows and into the Sea of Marmara.

In light of the inadequacies of Turkish fire and the facts that a new and more aggressive leader had taken command and a solution to the problem of slow minesweeping had been found, it would appear that the Allies could now successfully clear a path through

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<sup>34</sup> Sir Julian S. Corbett, *History of the Great War Based On Official Documents, Naval Operations, Vol. 2*, (London: Longmans, Green 1921), 224.

<sup>35</sup> Erickson, 166.

the straits. However, as the sweepers continued to move up into the Narrows, the range from Turkish guns would continue to decrease. This would cause an increase in the volume and accuracy of the Turkish fire. Also, the high ground on both sides of the Narrows would help protect the Turks from the allied naval bombardments.

### Phase 3: Forcing the Narrows

The third phase of the operation that began on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March held the most risk for the fleet. Admiral De Robeck's plan for forcing the Narrows divided his fleet into three divisions positioned in lines abreast. The first division or line consisted of the *Queen Elizabeth*, *Agamemnon*, *Lord Nelson*, and *Inflexible*. This line was accompanied by the *Triumph* and the *Prince George* on the right and left flank respectively. The second line consisted of French ships *Gaulois*, *Charmagne*, *Bouvet*, and *Souffren* with two more battleships, *Majestic* and *Swiftsure*, on the right and left flanks respectively. The final line consisted of *Vengeance*, *Irresistible*, *Albion*, and *Ocean*. The first line of ships were to move into the Dardanelles to a point about eight miles from the Kilid Bahr and Chanak, where they would engage these forts at long range. After it appeared that sufficient damage had been done, the French ships would move up through the first line to engage the targets at closer range. The French ships would be within range of the Turkish guns located in the Narrows; however, they would not move beyond the area that had been cleared by the minesweepers. After the bombardment from the French ships, the third line of ships would move up to the





front and continue the bombardment. It was hoped that by late afternoon, the Turkish defenses would be sufficiently destroyed, shocked, and thrown into disarray as to allow for the minesweepers to move in and clear mines in the afternoon and into the night until a passage had been cleared. Most of the fleet would then move through the Narrows and on to Constantinople.

The first line of ships commenced its bombardment at 1125 and continued until a few minutes past noon, at which time the French squadron moved up into firing position. During

this time all four of the Turkish forts in the Narrows were hit repeatedly, and there was a particularly heavy explosion at Chanak. The bombardment from the French ships continued until 1345. As the French fired on the shore defenses, the Turkish gunfire became more and more sporadic, until it completely stopped. Shortly before 1400 the French squadron began to retire as the third line of ships began to move forward. It was at this time that the *Bouvet* hit a mine and sank suddenly. The third line of ships moved up and continued to fire until 1600. The Turkish guns responded very sporadically at first but soon fell silent again. Just after 1600, six mine sweepers were brought forward to begin clearing the mines during daylight. They had just started when four of them came under fire from the Turks. Despite the fact that the fire was sporadic and inaccurate, it was enough to cease minesweeping operations. All sweepers turned about and ran out of the straits. Shortly after this, the *Inflexible* and the *Irresistible* struck mines in the vicinity of where the *Bouvet* had gone down. Approximately one hour later, the *Ocean* also hit a mine in the same area. While the *Inflexible* was able to make it back to Tenedos Island, a small island in Northern Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey strategically located outside the Straits of the Dardanelles, the crews of the *Irresistible* and the *Ocean* were evacuated. Shortly after the *Ocean* struck a mine, the remainder of the fleet departed the straits with plans to return after dark in an attempt to save the other vessels. Upon returning later that evening, it was discovered that both ships had sunk. This ended the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> of March.

The next morning De Robeck received a letter from the Admiralty urging him to press the attack. It also informed him that he was to receive five more battleships, four from the Admiralty and one from the French Ministry of Marine, to make good his losses. The *Inflexible* and the *Suffren* were sent to Malta for repairs and new volunteer crews were

assembled to man all of the minesweepers. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, De Robeck reported to the Admiralty that fifty British and twelve French minesweepers would soon be available and that floating nets would be laid across the straits when the attack continued to protect against floating mines. He stated that he expected operations to continue within three or four days. On 22 March, Admiral De Robeck completely reversed his plan of action. After a conference with General Sir Ian Hamilton, the senior Army officer on the scene, De Robeck proposed a joint operation in which the Army would secure the forts before the Navy tried to force a passage. After Admiral De Robeck's reversal, Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, then changed his own position refusing to challenge the judgment of the on-scene commander. Even with the support of Prime Minister Asquith and Lord Kitchener, Churchill could not get the cabinet to order De Robeck to renew the attack.

In analyzing the warfighting function of 'Fire' associated with the events of the 18<sup>th</sup>, several issues become evident. First, despite the fact that allied naval gunfire was unable to completely destroy the Turkish defenses, it was able to create sufficient chaos and destruction to ultimately reduced the effectiveness of the Turkish fire. This is demonstrated by the fact that while the allied ships were well within range of the ground defenses, not one battleship or trawler was lost due to Turkish gunfire. Further, casualties from Turkish gunfire were very limited. Though the Turks had fired thousands of rounds between the 25<sup>th</sup> of February and the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, it had resulted in only 31 casualties.<sup>36</sup> Second, while moving the fleet within range of the shore batteries was moderately risky due to the fact that the Turks possessed armor-piercing rounds, it had two benefits. First, it allowed for more accurate and effective allied fire which further reduced the effectiveness of Turkish fire. Second, it enticed

the Turks to expend large amounts of ammunition in an ineffective manner. Not only were the Turkish guns ineffective, they were almost out of ammunition. In particular, the heavy guns had less than 30 armor piercing shells remaining. Once the fleet was through the Narrows, they would face no other opposition in the Dardanelles. Despite these facts, the Turkish fires were able to scare off the minesweepers, which proved decisive in the operation.

The fact that the minesweepers fled the scene leads to questions regarding command and control of the operation. The main reason that the minesweepers fled from the area was not due to the threat posed by the Turkish guns. On the contrary, fire from these guns at this point was sporadic and inaccurate. The main reason the minesweepers fled was the poor civilian leadership and untrained civilian crews. This leads one to question why this problem was not rectified prior to the 18<sup>th</sup>. Commodore Keyes had identified this issue over ten days earlier. The one attempt at clearing the mines with an all-volunteer naval crew had proven extremely successful, while the civilian crews still floundered. On such a critical phase of the operation, the civilian crews clearly needed to be replaced. It is possible that De Robeck thought he would be able to overwhelm the Turkish defenses, and the minesweepers would be able to get about their business without harassment. Clearly previous operations had shown that while naval gunfire could limit the effectiveness of the Turkish guns, it could not stop it all together. If Carden or De Robeck had sent for naval minesweepers to replace or assist the trawlers prior to engaging the Narrows, the outcome of the operation might have been radically different. Naval minesweepers can reach speeds of up to 12 knots, which is a significant advantage given the current was up to 4 knots in the Narrows. This extra speed could have proved decisive in the operation.

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<sup>36</sup> Boswell, 146.

Another controversial decision made by De Robeck's was the decision to bring the minesweepers into a position where the Turkish guns were more concentrated and at closer range during daylight. Conducting mine clearing operations in daylight would make it much easier for the Turks to bring accurate fire to bear on the sweepers. To what extent this decision contributed to the minesweeping debacle cannot be known. However, the civilian crews had already shown a propensity to withdrawal during night operations when the Turkish fire was grossly inaccurate. This decision most certainly would have had a negative effect on these crews. With the increased accuracy of fire that the Turks would have during daylight hours, it is uncertain whether well-equipped and disciplined minesweeping crews could have cleared a path through the minefield.

Another key force protection issue relates to how the Turks managed to sink three battleships and damage another with mines in an area that had been previously cleared. During the operational pauses, the Allies failed to establish effective patrols to ensure that more mines were not laid in previously swept areas. On the night of March 9<sup>th</sup>, a Turkish mine expert had laid a new line of mines parallel to the Asiatic coast. The Allies had been utilizing seaplanes to check for mines during periods of good weather; however, as the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> demonstrated, this method was not very reliable. On the nights of the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup>, the minesweepers continued to clear the area in the lower straits that the ships would be maneuvering in. Three of the 19 mines that had been laid on the 9<sup>th</sup> were found but the rest were not cleared. Detailed records no longer exist to determine the exact cause of this decisive failure; however, it should be noted that the crews of the minesweepers were

inexperienced at night sweeping and unwilling to linger in areas under fire.<sup>37</sup> To make matters worse, the presence of these mines in a previously swept area was not reported to De Robeck until the 19<sup>th</sup>. The minesweeping crews had informed him that all was clear in this area at 0815 on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>38</sup> Carden's apprehensiveness created an operational pause that opened a window of opportunity for the Turks. The combination of inadequate patrolling, ineffective aerial spotting, and poor minesweeping procedures and reporting resulted in the loss of three battleships.

De Robeck's ultimate decision to abandon the naval assault leads to the belief that he was not in full support of the operation and was looking for a way out. An analysis of the situation that existed after the events of the 18<sup>th</sup>, shows that the Allied position had not been significantly degraded. On the contrary, the events of the 18<sup>th</sup> had enhanced the position of the Allies. The Allies had clearly identified their weaknesses and were making corrections. New minesweeping crews were being assembled, and there would now be twice as many crews. While the 639 casualties associated with the sinking of the *Bovet* were significant, there were less than seventy other casualties. The lost battleships were older and did not represent a significant set back. In fact, De Robeck was to be given more replacement ships than he had lost. The readiness of the fleet, thus, had not been reduced significantly. As for the Turks, they had reached their point of defensive culmination. They could not easily replace the mines that had been cleared due to a very limited supply. In fact, many of the mines they had placed were salvaged Russian mines that had been floated down the Bosphorus. As previously mentioned, they were also almost out of ammunition for the heavy

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<sup>37</sup> Boswell, 146.

<sup>38</sup> Hart, 9.

guns. It was thought by the Turks that after the remaining armor piercing rounds were gone, the smaller gun might be able to hold off the sweepers for one or two days but no longer.<sup>39</sup> However, as the events of the 13<sup>th</sup> of March had shown, these small guns were not effective at stopping persistent minesweeping crews. The fact that they had just been heavily bombarded and were almost out of ammunition would have further reduced their ability to halt the progress of the minesweepers. Commodore Keyes had correctly assessed the situation. When he returned from the straits after attempting to take the damaged ships in tow on the night of the 18<sup>th</sup>, he stated, "I had a most indelible impression that we were in the presence of a beaten foe. I thought he was beaten at 2pm, I knew he was beaten at 4pm, and at midnight I knew with still greater certainty that he was absolutely beaten." De Robeck on the other hand had great reservations about the operation after the events of the 18<sup>th</sup>. He had stated to Keyes on the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> that he would probably be dismissed from command on the following day because of his losses. While there are conflicting accounts of the meeting between De Robeck and Hamilton on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, it is clear that De Robeck was very agreeable to help from the Allied land forces.

In the final analysis of the operation, it becomes clear that the Allies demonstrated overwhelming firepower; however, planning, execution, and weather compromised its effectiveness. The gains made by the firepower advantage were always lost when offenses were ended. The Turks were able to neutralize much of what the Allies had accomplished when they were allowed time to regroup. Any advantage made by the Allies should have been immediately pressed. Additionally, the firepower should have continued pressure

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<sup>39</sup> Moorehead, 75.

without abatement. The inaction by allied commanders was devastating to the mission. Furthermore, it was clearly demonstrated that the civilian minesweepers were a distinct weakness in the allied plan. They turned and ran when courage and determination were essential to the mission. As circumstances proved on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, removing mines was crucial. The failure to do so resulted in a reversal of momentum and heavy losses. Had the minesweepers been commanded by a strong and determined leader and manned with crews willing and able to work under fire, the outcome to this point could have been much different.



## **Conclusions**

The predominant historical view of the Gallipoli Campaign tends to assert that a purely naval operation should never have been undertaken. Further, a significant amount of analysis asserts that the failure of the operation can be attributed to the fact that critical strategic, operational, and tactical aspects were not carefully considered.

Critics of the Naval campaign posit that even if the straits had been forced, Constantinople would not have fallen. Despite the fact that some historians are skeptical about the fall of Constantinople, the unbiased opinion of the American ambassador, Henry Morgenthau, who was in Constantinople at the time, speaks to the contrary. Morgenthau wrote the following in 1918:

Lord Kitchener, in giving his assent to a purely naval expedition, had relied upon a revolution in Turkey to make the enterprise successful. Lord Kitchener has been much criticized for his part in the Dardanelles attack; I owe it to his memory, however, to say that on this point he was absolutely right. Had the Allied fleets once passed the defenses at the Straits, the administration of the Young Turks would have come to a bloody end.

And further on in his book...

Yet it is my opinion that the purely naval attack was justified. I base this judgment on the political situation which then existed. There was no solidly established government in Turkey at that time. The whole Ottoman State, on that 18<sup>th</sup> day of March, 1915, when the Allied fleet abandoned the attack, was on the brink of dissolution...

It is known that there was a substantial pro British contingent in the city and the population that was very unhappy with the current leadership. Also, the Young Turks had made arrangements to abandon the city when the fleet arrived. They were set on burning it and had stashed fuel for the fire at the various police stations throughout the city.<sup>40</sup> Also, the

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<sup>40</sup> Moorehead, 68.

Young Turks themselves were split in their alliances. Enver Pasha had basically risen to a position of military dictator; however, the remainder of the Young Turks were more moderate and not pro German. In fact, Tallat Bey had met with Captain W. R. Hall, the Director of Naval Intelligence, in order to discuss what Tallat viewed as a political error and to negotiate an honorable peace.<sup>41</sup> Given this information, it would appear that there was reason to believe that the city might have come under Allied control had they successfully forced the straits. This leads to the next major point of contention, which is the question of whether or not it was even possible for a purely naval force to successfully force its way through the Dardanelles. Given the Allied advantage in firepower, the limitations of the Turkish batteries, and the capabilities of determined minesweepers, it is certainly reasonable to believe that it could have been accomplished. While it is clear that forcing the straits would not be easy, it was a calculated risk that had every chance of succeeding.

Given the reasonable assumption that a solely naval operation could have succeeded, it would then seem that poor execution had caused it to fail to meet its objectives.

Arguably, many things could have altered the outcome of this operation. If the Allies would not have bombarded the Turks on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, the Turks might not have shifted the focus of their defenses to the minefield. Further, they may not have devoted such great efforts to fortifying this area. If the Allies had chosen a bolder more decisive leader from the start, critical breaks in operational tempo might have been avoided. If the Allies had replaced the civilian minesweepers with all navy crews and brought in some of the fast minesweepers from the beginning, the minefields could have been more effectively cleared. The possibilities for

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<sup>41</sup> David French, *The origins of the Dardanelles campaign reconsidered*. (History, 68, 1983), 218.

choosing alternate courses of action that might have changed the end result are abundant.

The alteration of any one of the many key decisions may have changed the outcome.

Despite the fact that there were clearly problems with its execution, poor execution did not cause this operation to fail. With the advantage of a historical perspective and access to information about both combatants, it can be plainly seen that after the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, the Allies had a clear and strong advantage. While naval gunfire was unable to destroy the Turkish defenses, it had created enough chaos and damage to render them almost completely ineffective at harming vessels and killing sailors. The fact that not one vessel during the entire naval campaign was lost due to shore batteries clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of this fire. Further, Turkish ammunition for heavy guns was almost completely expended after the 18<sup>th</sup> of March. Whether one chooses to believe Major Muhlmann or the Turkish War Office official about the amount of ammunition the Turks possessed, three things remain clear. First, they both agree that ammunition for the heavy guns was critically low and only this type of round could seriously threaten a battleship. Second, Turkish guns were so inaccurate that not one ship or trawler was lost due to this fire. Finally, Turkish guns repeatedly ceased firing when they came under attack from Allied naval bombardment. After the events of the 18<sup>th</sup>, the ability of the Turks to mount any sort of defense against the fleet was questionable. With the land forces rendered almost completely ineffective, the mines lining the straits were the only other obstacles left for the Allies. However, the problems that had hampered previous minesweeping progress, had been resolved. The navy now had over fifty all-volunteer minesweepers. And if that was not enough, by early April they had 12 pairs of trained and disciplined Fast Minesweepers. The Fast Minesweepers were larger ships that could sweep in formations at speeds of 14 to 20 knots. At these speeds, the heavy

sweeping wire parted the mine mooring wire rendering the mine safe as it floated out of the straits.<sup>42</sup> The proof of how effective this new minesweeping force was is evident by the progress they made from the 25<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> of April. After it was decided to abandon the purely naval attempt to force the straits, a new plan was derived.

The new plan called for the Allied land forces, which would land on the 25<sup>th</sup>, to move up the peninsula as the Naval forces cleared the straits. The minesweeping force began clearing operations on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and had cleared a path to a point that was approximately 8,000 yards from forts in the Narrow by the 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>43</sup> Despite the fact that the Turks had been given over a month to reorganize, the naval force sustained only light damage to ships and a small number of casualties. Unfortunately for the Allies, the land forces were unable to make any progress. Thus, the minesweeping force was stopped. Commodore Keyes addressed the question of forcing the straits in his memoirs when he stated, “I wish to place on record that I had no doubt then, and have no doubt now – and nothing will ever shake my opinion – that from the 4<sup>th</sup> of April onward the Fleet could have forced the straits.” It can be solidly argued that with one more push, the fleet could have gotten through the straits. It will never be known, however, if it would have succeeded because the operation was halted and the plan was changed.

Many arguments can and have been made to support the assertion that a purely naval assault was the product of poor strategy and poor execution. However, failure of the operation to meet its objectives cannot be attributed to either condition. In the end, the overall failure of the operation to meet its objectives can only be attributed to the fact that the plan was changed and the potentially successful purely naval operation was abandoned.

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<sup>42</sup> Boswell, 147.

## **APPENDIX A: Chronology of Events**

28 June 1914	Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary is assassinated in Sarajevo
1 August 1914	Germany declares war on Russia.
3 August 1914	British announce that they will not deliver the two war ships purchased by Turkey.
3 August 1914	Germany declares war on France.
4 August 1914	Britain declares war on Germany.
9 August 1914	Goeben and Breslau enter the Dardanelles.
5 September 1914	Battle of The Marne.
26 September 1914	The Dardanelles are blocked and mines are laid.
29 October 1914	The Goeben, Breslau, and a Turkish squadron attack Odessa harbor.
2 November 1914	Russia declares war on Turkey.
3 November 1914	British and French squadrons bombard the forts at the entrance of the Dardanelles.
5 November 1914	France and Britain declare war on Turkey.
30 December 1914	Russia requests help against the Turks.
3 January 1915	Churchill sends telegram to Carden asking if he thought that forcing the Dardanelles by ship alone was practical.
5 January 1915	Carden responds that the Dardanelles might be forced by an extended operation with a large number of ships.
11 January 1915	Carden's plan arrives in London.
13 January 1915	War Council decides to move forward with the operation.
19 February 1915	Naval attack begins. Weather turns bad that night.

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<sup>43</sup> Boswell, 147.

25 February 1915	Naval attack recommences.
27 Feb - 8 Mar 1915	Weather was intermittent. Naval bombardment and minesweeping operations were stopped during periods of bad weather.
8-9 March 1915	Pause in operation. Turks lay new mines in previously cleared area.
10 - 12 March 1915	Slow progress with civilian minesweeping. One minesweeper sunk.
11 March 1915	Churchill sends message to Carden, "Results gained are, however, great enough to justify loss of ships and men....."
12 March 1915	Allies receive a German transmission that indicates the defenses in the Dardanelles are running very low on ammunition and morale is low.
13 March 1915	All volunteer crews on minesweepers make good progress but lose three minesweepers. Straits cleared to the entrance of the Narrows.
14 March 1915	Churchill sends message to Carden, "I do not understand why minesweeping should be interfered with by firing which causes no casualties."
15 March 1915	Carden tells Keyes that he can no longer continue.
17 March 1915	De Robeck officially takes command.
18 March 1915	Large-scale naval assault on Turkish defenses. Three ships sunk and one badly damaged. Turks reach culminating point of defense.
19 March 1915	The Admiralty sends reinforcements to replace losses.
20 March 1915	De Robeck reports that he should be ready to continue operations in three or four days with fifty British and twelve French minesweepers manned by all volunteer crews.
22 March 1915	De Robeck meets with Hamilton and decides to abandon attempts to achieve objectives via naval assets alone.

## **APPENDIX B: List of Personalities**

Bey, Talaat	Turkish Minister of Internal Affairs
Carden, Vice Admiral	Commander of Allied Mediterranean Fleet
Callwell, C. E. Major General	Director of Military Operations at the British War Office
Churchill, Winston	First Lord of the Admiralty
De Robeck, Rear Admiral	Carden's Replacement as Fleet Commander
Fisher, Sir John, Admiral	First Sea Lord
Hamid, Abdul	Sultan and Kalief of the Ottoman Empire
Hamilton, Sir Ian, General	Land Forces Commander
Keyes, Sir Roger, Commodore	Vice Admiral Carden's Chief of Staff
Kitchener, Lord, Field Marshal	Secretary of State for War
Mehmed V	Replaced Hamid as Sultan and Kalief in 1909
Morgenthau, Henry	American Ambassador to Turkey, 1915
Muhlmann, Carl, Major	Staff officer for Von Sanders' Fifth Army
Nicholas, Grand Duke	Commander in Chief of the Russian Army
Pasha, Djemal	Turkish Minister of the Navy
Pasha, Enver	Turkish Minister of War
Pasha, Weber	Commander of the Turkish fortifications in the Dardanelles
Von Sanders, Liman, General	Commander of the German Military Mission in Turkey

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